Japan's Past Half-Century of Ceramics

By Matthew Gurewitsch

For centuries, Japanese potters threw clay on the wheel, coaxed it into a cup or bowl, and fired it in the kiln. Refinements—glazes!—aside, that was that. Then the bomb fell on Hiroshima, and nothing could be taken for granted any more, not even this.

"Contemporary Clay: Japanese Ceramics for the New Century," at the Japan Society through Jan. 21, illustrates the infinite new possibilities. Overarching themes? Given the premise, how could there be any? Still, the curator, Joe Earle, based at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, has found clusters of pieces that speak to each other. Even in the shell-shocked aftermath of cataclysm, nature and memory remain the wellsprings of creativity, generating affinities where one least expects them. Old forms may perish or they may not. New ones appear. Disciples find masters, the immemorial patterns of transmission take hold again, and life goes on, different and the same.

Drawing principally on the collection of Halsey and Alice North, who have al-

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ready given or promised many of the exhibits to the MFA, Mr. Earle mounted a first edition of this show at that institution. For New York, he has incorporated further loans from additional sources, virtually doubling the checklist to some 100 pieces. The earliest piece dates to 1958, the most recent came from the kiln this year. But overall the selection favors the very new. Three quarters of the materia-

al was produced since 1990; and over half postdates 1992. The installation, de-

signed by Perry Hu (whose work has also been seen at the Asia Society), un-

folds in an elegant suite of chambers connected by arched passages and holes punched in the walls that allow certain objects to be seen among the objects first of one room, then of another. The effect is clean and graceful, with sublimi-

nal accents of Mykonos, perhaps, or of Santa Fe—cosmopolitan, rather than con-

ventionally Japanese.

The first chamber—untitled—is occupied by a single large studio ceramic (the fancy term for a sculptural object made of clay): Akiyama Yo’s “Metavoid 4” (2004), which strikes an apt, chaotic note.

A small ensemble of ceramics inspired by natural forms is a high point, as much for Koike Shoko’s vessels, which mimic baroque seashells, as for the shape of the portly Kabuki actor. Their surfaces raked as meticulously as the gravel in a Zen garden. A gallery of por-

cein is a few steps farther is no less spell-

binding, though in a very different way, focusing the attention on virtuoso tech-

nique. Nesting bowls by Yagi Akira (son of Yagi Kazuo, of “A Cloud Remem-

bered”) stop visitors in their tracks—es-

pecially the pale-blue glazed set of 22,

ranging in diameter from 10 inches down to about an eighth of an inch, each one not only thrown on a wheel (the smallest with the aid of needle and magnifying glass) but also equipped with a proper foot.

The list of astonishments goes on: witty silk-screened stoneware by Mishima Kimiyo, reproducing such unloved refuse as discarded newspapers and bat-

tered pineapple boxes; porcelain by Na-

gao Shiheike, which articulates points and curves with the panache of the wild-

est glassblower; Matsuura Yuriko’s cheeky, gaudy body parts; Katsumata Chieko’s simulacra of anemones, gourds and coral, vaguely toxic in hue.

Often, the surface alone is enough to dazzle, like chocolate butter cream on an ash-glazed jar by Nishihata Tadashi, like silver-misted quilted silk on Kondo Takahiro’s “Galaxy,” like lace wrapped around the vessels of Kitamura Junko. Glazes range from rich, syrupy moss greens and ochre that evoke the Tang dynasty in China to jazzy brick-on-black designs that conjure up Keith Haring. Sometimes, the spatial form is para-

mount, as in Yoshikawa Masunichi’s “Gorgeous Effigy,” which might double as the architectural model for the world’s most inviting swimming pool; Fukami Soehara’s porcelain containers—sassy riffs on the cube—are made to order for the dressing table of a 21st-century Cleopatra. There is little to seem to whirl in place like dervishes. There is a box that conjures up oceans, sand dunes and mountain ranges on the out-

side and the glow of sunset on a vortex that nestles inside. Only tall people can see in without standing on tiptoe.

Some of the displays are shown in glass cases. A surprising number are pro-

tected only by signs saying not to touch. But whether the finish is rugged or sattin-

smooth, pottery is meant for the hand as much as for the eye. For the tactile expe-

rience, alas, we must become collectors ourselves, or cultivate them.

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